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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the importance of school-family partnerships at the pre-college and postsecondary level and suggests specific steps TRIO and other educational opportunity programs can take to build more effective partnerships with their students' families. The first section summarizes what is known about the effects of parent involvement on a student's school success in terms of, first, the effect of family characteristics on student achievement; second, attitudes and practices of families and schools; and, third, the characteristics of effective family involvement programs. The second section describes a process of collaborative action research that TRIO programs can use to strengthen their relationships with families. Some examples of effective practices used by various TRIO programs are noted: Upward Bound, Talent Search, Student Support Services, the McNair parent handbook, and Educational Opportunity Centers. (Contains 33 references.) (DB)

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Partnerships with Families Promote TRIO Student Achievement

Many TRIO projects are building strong, effective relationships with families of their students to promote student achievement. Research about family partnerships can provide a context and framework to strengthen project relationships with families.

by Joan Becker

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Partnerships with Families Promote TRIO Student Achievement

BY JOAN BECKER

Partnerships with Families Promote TRIO Student Achievement is the first in a continuing series of National TRIO Clearinghouse short papers that will condense current research on topics relevant to TRIO and other educational opportunity programs. The purpose of the short papers is to provide a research framework for project practice.

Future topics include: Researcher as Practitioner, EOC's and Welfare Reform, Retention of First Generation Students in Postsecondary Education, Results of Descriptive Survey of Talent Search Middle School Projects, Providing Services to TRIO Students with Disabilities and Technology and Upward Bound Projects.

These Short papers will be available as reprints and will be downloadable from the National TRIO Clearinghouse Website at www.trioprograms.org (Clearinghouse Publications).

The evidence is beyond dispute: children are more successful and the schools they attend are better when their parents are involved in their learning at home and at school (Henderson and Berla, 1994). The evidence is also beyond dispute that many families and schools, particularly those at the lowest socio-economic levels, are struggling to find ways to work together to promote student achievement. In recognition of the important role the family plays in shaping student's school achievement, policymakers have made building strong family, school and community partnerships a key element of their efforts to improve education (National Governor's Association, 1990). The U. S. Department of Education's (1994) nationwide campaign, America Goes Back to School, is the most visible of these efforts. The campaign calls upon individuals, businesses, civic and community groups and churches to work with schools and families to build community partnerships which support the learning and high achievement of all students.

The TRIO community is joining this effort. Many TRIO Programs have strong, effective relationships with the families of their students. Others know they can do better and have made building partnerships with families that support achievement a high priority. To broaden and deepen the knowledge and skills of TRIO personnel, the Council for Opportunity in Education has, for the past two years, sponsored a national forum on Family Involvement in collaboration with The St. Paul Companies and, this year, Philips and the National TRIO Clearninghouse. An important strength that TRIO programs bring to partnership building efforts is the fact that for many students, the program becomes an extended family.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a context and a framework for thinking about family partnerships and student achievement and to suggest specific steps TRIO and other educational opportunity programs can take to build stronger, more effective partnerships with the families of their students. The first section provides the context by summarizing what is known about the effects of parent involvement on student's school success. This literature can be grouped into three areas: the effect of family characteristics on student achievement, attitudes and practices of families and schools, and the characteristics of effective family involvement programs. The final section describes a process of collaborative action research that TRIO Programs can use to strengthen their relationships with families. It should be

noted that while this paper focuses primarily on building partnerships with the families of pre-college students, the strategies are relevant to programs working with undergraduates and adults.

Family Characteristics and Achievement

The earliest parent involvement studies focused on the relationship between family characteristics and school achievement. These studies found a strong correlation between socio-economic status and student achievement—students from affluent families tend to achieve at higher levels than those from poor families (Blau and Duncan, 1967; Hauser, 1971). Coleman (1966) found that family background influenced student achievement, but less so in minority families than in majority ones. Moynihan (1965) and others, in the 1960's and 70's, explained these lower achievement rates by asserting that the culture of poverty created social pathologies which made it impossible for poor children to achieve at the same levels as children from middle class white environments (Valentine, 1968).

In the 1970's and 1980's researchers began to look at the relationship between the culture that children bring to school and the culture of the school. Several found that the middle class norms and expectations in the culture of the schools were in conflict with those of poor and working class families. They found that teachers' conceptions of race, class, ability and effort shaped their perceptions of students and their families. Poor students were assumed to be less capable and were often tracked to the lowest levels in the class (Oakes 1985; Rist, 1970). Likewise, parents' perceptions of teachers are shaped by their own experiences with race and class and by their school experiences which, for many poor parents, were negative (Baker and Stevenson, 1986). Comer (1980) found that children achieve at higher levels when schools respect and capitalize on their culture and values.

More recent studies have found that regardless of socio-economic status, the degree to which family practices and structures support learning and education significantly affects achievement. Clark (1983), in his study of high and low achieving African American teenagers from low income families, found that the parenting style of achievers encouraged sponsored independence; parents set clear and consistent limits, had high expectations, encouraged academic achievement, and engaged in activities that taught skills and knowledge needed for school success. These parents periodically interacted with the school to check on the progress of their child and the extent to which school personnel were acting in their child's interests. Clark found that the parents of low achievers practiced unsponsored independence: supervision was loose and infrequent and interactions at home did not support academic achievement. These parents were not involved in school; when they were, it was generally for negative reasons. They tended to place responsibility for learning and school success with the child.

Eagle (1989) found factors such as having a place to study, parents' emphasis on reading and having parents who interact with their children about education to be significantly associated with achievement. Controlling for socio-economic status, she concluded that the degree to which parents were involved in their childrens learning was the variable most strongly related to achievement. Similarly, Milne (1989) found that the ability of families to provide the material, financial, and experiential resources for strong learning was key to student success. Other aspects of the home environment that have been found to positively affect achievement include established routines; structured and monitored after school activities; high, but realistic expectations; and children's extensive engagement with adults who read, write, and discuss (Dornbusch and Ritter, 1988; Epstein and Salinas, 1991; Snow, et al, 1991).

Practices and Attitudes

As the family practices and structures that positively affect student achievement became clearer, researchers began to turn their attention to documenting the ways and the extent to which different families are involved in their children's learning at home and at school and the ways the practices and attitudes of school personnel shape family involvement. These researchers also examined how parents, teachers, and adolescents feel about the relationship between home and school and what they want from each other.

Henderson and Berla (1994), in their review of 66 parent involvement studies and reports, found that children are more likely to be successful if their parents play four key roles: teacher, supporter, advocate, and decision maker. Parents are the first teachers; the learning environment they provide at home is key. Parenting style and the extent to which parents interact with their children in ways that promote achievement are important elements of this environment (Steinberg, et al., 1995). In their role as supporters of their children and of the school, parents provide knowledge and expertise; as advocates they teach negotiation skills and work to ensure that the system treats their child fairly. Parents are involved as decision-makers by making choices about the school their child will attend and their potential programs of study. In some cases, parents are involved on committees and governing bodies.

Most parents are involved in some way in the learning of their children—they ask about homework and, when they can, they help. Most also want more information from school and teachers about how they can help their children at

home (Epstein, 1996; Connors and Epstein, 1994; Roderick and Stone, 1998). Some parents are involved in activities at the school which support student learning, such as chaperoning field trips or participating in parent-teacher conferences. A small number are engaged in decision making and other governance activities (Dauber and Epstein, 1993).

As more and more mothers have entered the work force as single heads of household and as second wage earners, it has become increasingly difficult for families to find time to be involved in their children's schools (Dauber and Epstein, 1993). The times and locations of meetings, transportation, child care and language barriers often restrict the opportunities for interaction. Moreover, parents and educators often do not know how to work together. Few teachers have any formal training in working effectively with families; they assume that when they ask parents to be involved, those parents know how (Epstein, 1992). For low-income and working-class parents in inner city schools, the barriers of geography, class and culture make involvement even more problematic. In addition, many of these parents had negative school experiences and don't trust school personnel; many are intimidated; for many the home-school relationship is adversarial (Lightfoot, 1978; Comer, 1980).

As children move from elementary school to secondary school, the home-school relationship becomes more complex. Parental participation decreases dramatically (Dauber and Epstein, 1993; Chavkin and Williams, 1993; Roderick and Stone, 1998). This is due in part to the structure of high school—more teachers, varied curricular offerings, and larger buildings that are often farther from home. Schoolwork becomes more complex and some parents lack the academic skills to assist. The decline in parental participation is also due to the developing adolescent's need for independence and individuation. Teenagers often push their parents away, preferring to be with their peers, not wanting to be seen with their parents. Parents often step back when their children enter high school, wanting them to have the space to learn to be responsible or feeling that they are ready to be on their own.

Teachers, parents and students think differently about family partnerships (Epstein, 1996). Many parents want to be more involved in and have a cooperative relationship with, the school. They want the school to do more to involve them. They participate when school personnel create opportunities and extend invitations for them to get involved at the school. They also engage in home learning activities and help their children more with homework and future planning when they are given information, guidance and encouragement (Dauber and Epstein, 1993). The degree and quality of the communication from school personnel shapes the extent and ways parents interact with their teens about school work and planning for the future (Roderick & Stone, 1998).

Teachers acknowledge the importance of parental involvement and express a desire for greater involvement, but say they lack time and training. Teachers also often assume that parents are not more involved because they don't care. Data from parents and teachers suggests that when school personnel do contact families, it is generally for negative reasons. Teachers are also ambivalent about the role they want parents to play. Many feel that it is the job of parents to send their children to school ready to learn, but that once the child gets to school, teaching is their job. These teachers do not want parents involved in curricular decisions. (Connors and Epstein, 1994; Dornbusch and Ritter, 1988).

High school students have mixed feelings about parental involvement. Large numbers of the 20,000 middle class teens surveyed by Steinberg and his colleagues (1995) reported that their parents are not involved in their learning or in their high school. More than 50% said their parents don't get mad at them if they don't do well in school. One third said their parents did not know how they were doing in school. Only 20% consistently attended school functions; 40% never attended. While 82% of the student respondents in Connors and Epstein's study agreed that parents need to be more involved, just over half want their parents to be involved as "knowledgeable partners" (Connors and Epstein, 1994, p. iii).

Effective Programs

The bulk of the evidence on the home school relationship comes from studies at the elementary and middle school levels where most partnership building efforts have been focused. Studies have found that effective programs teach families to foster the social, emotional, and intellectual development of their children, to communicate high expectations, and to reinforce the skills and knowledge needed for school success, including good study habits, literacy skills, and the value of education (Clark, 1983; Epstein, 1992; Snow, et. al., 1991). The most effective programs encouraged full partnerships with families (Comer, 1988) and were comprehensive (Gordon, 1979), well-planned (Becher, 1985), and long-lasting (Gordon, 1979).

Knowledge about what works at the high school level is much more limited. Only three of the 34 studies of family involvement programs reviewed by Henderson and Berla (1994) worked with high school parents. The programs reviewed focused on helping parents navigate the transition from middle to high school and high school to college and/or work. Successful strategies included keep-

ing parents informed about and helping them become involved in decisions regarding curricular placements, planning for the future and monitoring after-school and social activities (Chavkin, 1993; Nettles, 1991; Simich-Dudgeon, 1993). Henderson and Berla (1994), found that the specific way individual parents were involved in the high school programs reviewed was less important to the overall effectiveness of the program than the number of families involved and the extent to which families were involved in different ways.

Roderick and Stone (1998) found that schools which linked improving student achievement to building strong relationships with families saw the greatest improvement in student performance.

In their study of partnership building efforts in Chicago high schools, Roderick and Stone (1998) found that schools which linked improving student achievement to building strong relationships with families saw the greatest improvement in student performance. These schools focused on academics and on improving access to information about how students are doing, building parent's academic skills, bringing parents and teachers together to share issues and concerns and building the school's capacity to reach out to parents.

One group is noticeably left out of most partnership building efforts, and that is children. Epstein (1996) argues that this is reflective, in part, of a lack of knowledge about the role children, particularly adolescents, play in family, school and community partnerships. She says it is "crucial to recognize that the student is an active learner, ultimately responsible for his or her education, and the main communicator between home and school" (p. 31). Teen's increased need for autonomy does not mean they need their parents to be less involved. Teenagers face a wide variety of choices—some positive and others negative. They continue to need guidance and support from their parents, but in different ways and forms (Eccles and Harold, 1995). Parents have the greatest influence on the crowd their teens affiliate with and their long-term educational plans (Steinberg, et. al., 1995).

Building Strong Family, School and Community Partnerships

Collaborative action research has been found to be a particularly effective strategy for building school, community and family partnerships for learning. The purpose of action research is to use research to drive institutional change; it is "a tool for collective social problem solving" (Palanki and Burch, 1995). Epstein and Connors (1994) recommend establishing an Action Team, made up of parents, students and school personnel to examine the levels, variety and effects of family involvement and to design and implement strategies to involve more families in ways that support achievement. TRIO personnel should be members of the Action Team and also may want to include target school or institutional representatives. One staff member should be designated as the team coordinator.

The Action Team should start by gauging the current level of family involvement in the students' learning in the program and in school. The Team should also get input from families about their needs and interests. A survey can be a useful tool to collect this information.[1] Based on the survey results, the Action Team should then brainstorm and design strategies to promote involvement in six broad areas: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community (Epstein, 1992). In each of these areas, the Team should ask itself, "what are the outcomes we hope to achieve? and, In what time frame?"

Once a list of possible strategies and outcomes has been developed, the Team should prioritize these strategies and select 2-3 that will be implemented in the initial phase of work. The list should be saved so that once the initial activities are in place and beginning to have the desired results, new strategies can be implemented. At the end of the initial phase, the Team should assess the effectiveness of the activities. Are they achieving the desired outcome? Which families are being reached? The strategies and activities should be revised in light of this assessment. The Team will want to make a one year and multi-year action plans. The plans should include evaluation strategies and timelines.

In administering the surveys and developing strategies, the Action Team should be particularly mindful of barriers created by language and culture. For example, efforts should be made to ensure that families have access to information in their native language. The Action Team will also need to ensure that families have access to information in forms that they can understand. For example, it is more effective to communicate with parents who do not have strong reading skills by talking to them over the phone or face-to-face than it is to send written notices and reports. The Action Team should also be mindful of actively involving students in the partnership building effort. This will increase and strengthen their opportunities for active learning and will give them more responsibility for that learning. Few partnership programs provide these kinds of opportunities and few engage in strategies that include students or take advantage of the fact that the students are an important communication link between home and school.

In thinking about how to best involve students, the developmental stage of the target population should be considered. Programs working with pre-collegiate students will need to consider issues of adolescent development. Those working with older students will need to think about adult development. In addition, regardless of age, there are TRIO students who are parents themselves. Programs serving students who have children will need to develop strategies which support the student in her parenting role and help her fulfill her family and her academic responsibilities.

Conclusion

It is clear from this literature that student achievement is linked to family characteristics. However, the extent to which parents engage in practices that support achievement is more important than the family's socio-economic status. It is also clear that children do better in school when their parents are involved in their learning at home and at school. While more and more parents face obstacles to being involved, most want to be more involved. They want school personnel to provide opportunities and support for them to be involved and they get involved when these are provided. The more closely parent involvement strategies are linked to academics, the more student performance will improve. TRIO programs can develop stronger, more effective partnerships with families by engaging in a thoughtful, data-driven action research process that involves families, students and program staff in identifying strategies to include all families in supporting the learning of their children.

See side box for examples of strategies currently being used in TRIO programs.

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[1] The Center on Families, Communities, Schools, and Children's Learning at Johns Hopkins University has developed a useful instrument that can be reproduced with their permission. For more information, call or write the Center: 3505 North Charles Street, Baltimore, MD 21218; (410) 516-0370. The National PTA has also developed a useful survey: A Leader's Guide to Parent Involvement; National PTA, 330 N. Wabash Ave., Suite 2100, Chicago, IL 60611; (312) 670-6782.

Examples of Effective Practices Used by TRIO Programs

Upward Bound

- Orientation for parents
- Regular phone calls to parents to discuss their child's progress
- Parent/student advising sessions.
- Involve parents in discussions with students about anti-drug initiatives, youth-related health issues, and educational concerns
- Invite parents to participate in field trips and program activities
- Parent advisory boards

Talent Search

- Workshops for parents on teen issues, higher education awareness and planning, financial aid, drug awareness and the like
- Newsletter focusing on key things parents can do to help their child prepare for college

Student Support Services

- Parent handbook for the parents of freshman
- Orientation for parents and families
- Newsletter focusing on issues facing the students
- Exam sponsor week care packages from parents

McNair

- Parent handbook on doctoral education
- Invite families to McNair graduation
- Invite families to research presentations

Educational Opportunity Centers

- Resource directory of services for children and families
- Workshops for clients who are parents focused on educational and social issues facing their children

All Programs

- Letter writing campaigns
- Phone trees

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Suggested Readings

Epstein, J. L. (1989, October). School/family/community partnerships: Caring for the children we share. Phi Delta Kappan, 76(9), 701-712.

Epstein provides a succinct overview of her theory of school, family, community partnerships. She argues that home, school, and the community all have powerful influences on children's development and school success. The more these "spheres of influence" overlap and focus on school success, the more likely it is that children will be successful. Epstein focuses on six types of family involvement: parenting, communication, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community. For each type, she provides examples of activities and strategies, examines the effects these activities have on student success, and discusses the challenges educators face in including all families in the most effective activities.

Epstein, J. L. (1996). Perspectives and previews on research and policy for school, family, and community partnerships. In A. Booth and J. F. Dunn (Eds.). Family school links: How do they effect educational outcomes. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Epstein provides an in-depth analysis of the literature on school, family, and community partnerships. Excellent summary of the effects of partnerships on student and school performance and the factors which encourage and hinder partnership building efforts. Lays out a future research agenda for the field.

Henderson, A. T. and Berla, N. (1994). A new generation of evidence: The family is critical to student achievement. Washington, DC: National Committee for Citizens in Education.

Henderson and Berla review 66 parent involvement studies. Short summaries and key findings are provided for each study. Excellent summary of the important findings in the field.

Palanki, A. and Burch, P. (1995, July). In our hands: A multi-site parent-teachers action research project. (Report No. 30). Center on Families, Communities, Schools, and Children's Learning.

Describes action research projects in eight elementary and middle schools. The schools are urban and rural and represent the range in terms of socio-economic status, race, and ethnicity. Describes the process and benefits of action research. Focused on policies and practices and the effects of these on attitudes and student success.

Roderick, M. and Stone, S. (1998). Changing standards, changing relationships: Building family-school relationships to promote achievement in high schools. Research Brief. Student Life in High Schools Project. University of Chicago, School of Social Service Administration.

Looks at the effects of efforts in Chicago high schools to strengthen relationships with families. Found that schools which linked improving student achievement to building strong relationships with families saw the greatest improvement in student performance. These schools focused on academics and on improving access to information about how students are performing, building parent's academic skills, bringing parents and teachers together to share issues and concerns, and building the school's capacity to reach out to parents.